

Chapter 2

Spaces That Support Independence

An optimum classroom environment can go a long way in helping young students work independently. Access to carefully considered materials and daily routines will build a strong foundation for your writing program.

I've seen writer's workshop work in classrooms the size of gymnasiums and in spaces no larger than a closet. Join me as I describe my ideal setting, which includes a meeting area, a conference area (optional in kindergarten), a writing center (not a place where students work, but a place where materials are kept), a good management system, and a publishing area.

Meeting Area

I choose a meeting area where I and my fellow writers will come together to discuss writing. When teaching mini-lessons, I prefer to have us huddled together on a rug rather than having students seated at tables or desks. The setting is more intimate and collegial, the topic at hand more timely. It's easy to maintain focus and allow students to



Many first-grade teachers complain of students lying down during meeting time. Believe it or not, there's a physical reason. Six-year-olds' shoulders are still developing muscle! Shoulders tire quickly and then the students go prone. This is a good reason to include time for moving around each day.

"pair and share" when they are sitting in a circle or a tight cluster.

Ideally, my meeting area is also my reading corner. Often during a mini-lesson, students will make connections to texts they have read. For example, while talking about the joy of refrains, a student recalls that *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss con-

tains a repeating sentence. We reach for the book and sure enough, there is a refrain: "I'm afraid it won't come up," is expressed over and over again. We share the joy of excavating when we read from the actual book.

In addition to books, I recommend having in the meeting area a means of projecting sample writing and graphic organizers (overhead projector, LCD projector, or Smartboard) and a whiteboard or easel pad. Easel pads are great because you can look back on the writing, charts, or lists you and your class have recorded. You can also tear off sheets and hang them to use as a resources.

Conference Area

On my whiteboard is a permanent place for conference sign-ups. I have written "Conference" at the top and there are three spots to sign up below. Students sign up for conferences when they are inspired to share or when they would like to discuss any aspect of the writing process. They need not wait until they feel a piece is finished. Students erase their names after a conference, allowing other writers to volunteer. I conference with as many students as time will allow (names carry over to the next day).

Nearby is a table—ideally a round table—with several chairs. As any primary teacher will tell you, young students have a tendency to line up behind the teacher, eager to show their work. Partly to discourage this behavior, as it prevents me from conferencing with students who have signed up and keeps them from sharing their writing with peers, and partly to provide students who are overly active a positive place to light, I turn to the line and say rather authoritatively: "Sit down. Come on. You're welcome at this conference." Those students who had no intention of being pulled into listening quickly learn to read their work to a friend instead of lining up behind me. The stu-

dents who do need a break from writing (such as the student in Stacey's room who had tired fingers) will usually happily join us, and I would rather have them attentive to writing instruction than disrupting classmates.

I keep a CD player within arm's reach. During the first ten minutes of writing (also known as "Quiet Ten," see page 8), I play classical music.

In the center of the conference table or nearby is my binder for keeping anecdotal records. I've tried many record-keeping systems, always hoping the next one will be more efficient and useful than the last. But of all the approaches I've tried, I recommend the use of a large three-ring binder. I fill it with notebook paper and use page dividers to give each student a section. For example, when Tomas comes to a conference, I simply flip open to his pages. I read my brief notes from our last session and then record what we discuss that day before I meet with the next student. This procedure adds continuity from one conference to the next. Additionally, in the front of this binder I keep a supply of sticky notes. I use the sticky notes to record what the child has decided to do next and adhere the note to his or her writing.

I should also point out that I use another type of record-keeping—one intended to keep track of how often students have come to conference, participated in author's chair (see Chapter 3, page 49), or published a piece. I want this information available at a glance, so for this purpose I use a traditional rank book or grade book. I record student names down the left-hand side of the page. The days of the week are listed at the top, and I use the following codes to keep track of events:

C = conferenced

P = published

S = shared work

T = taught a mini-lesson with me

A = absent

This book is not permanently stored at the conference table; instead, I carry it with me at all times and use additional codes to keep track of reading activities or the completion of a special project. Knowing what each student has done within any given week goes a long way in giving up the need to have every child doing the same thing

at the same time—or giving students regularly assigned times to conference or publish.

Writing Center

For a time, I secretly feared that the real purpose of the writing center was to indulge my love of office supplies. (I'm drawn to Staples the way other women are to shoe stores.) However, as I've illustrated in Chapter 1, letting go of control of supplies helps your students behave independently and frees you to teach writing. After years of working in classrooms other than my own, I do believe having a supply center is essential to a well-oiled workshop.

The writing center (Figure 2.1) can be a permanent or mobile area in the classroom. I've seen writing materials rolled in on carts during writing time, or contained in shoe-pocket organizers that are prominently hung when needed.

Here are the supplies I store in my writing center. I've divided my list into two categories: items deemed mandatory and those that are optional.

Figure 2.1
The Writing
Center



Mandatory

- Writing folders
- Blank paper, story paper, notebook paper
- Date stamp and ink pad
- Pencils: standard and blue or green pencils for editing
- Alphabet charts (may be on folders or adhered to desks)
- Scissors and tape
- Graphic organizers
- Editor's checklists
- Scrap paper and supply request forms

Optional

- Stapler
- Pens (often preferred over pencils)
- Crayons, colored pencils, markers
- Sticky notes
- Baby name book
- Children's magazines
- Hole punch
- Brad fasteners

Let's look closely at the items and their purposes.

Folders and a Variety of Paper

Journals often work best for kindergarten students, because young children have such a difficult time keeping track of loose paper.

Many first-grade teachers will wonder if they should provide journals for the same reason, but teaching students to manage loose paper in folders will allow for differentiation and encourage revision.

For first and second graders, I recommend using loose paper rather than journals. That's not to say that I don't use any journals: I love dialogue journals, response to literature journals, and learning logs. However, during writing time, I prefer students to be working with loose paper. Here's why:

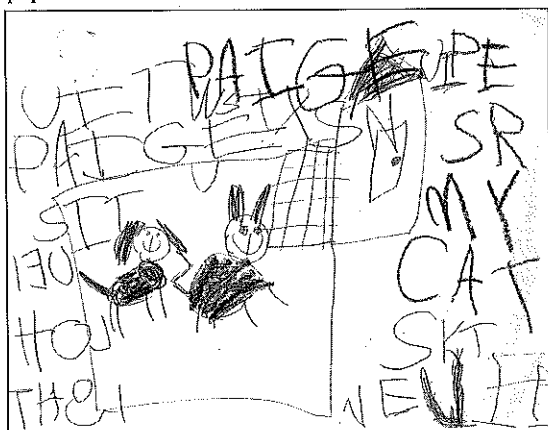
The length of a piece of writing should not be determined by the duration of a writing period or by filling one journal page. Too often I hear kids say, "I'm done," when they've reached the bottom of a journal page.

Second, good revision techniques include cutting and taping, crossing out, and making substantial additions—all difficult to do when working with a journal. Journals are too often perceived as

books, and most of us learn at a very early age not to "hurt" a book. Instead of pristine pages, we want to see examples of writers making important decisions around what to leave in and what to take out.

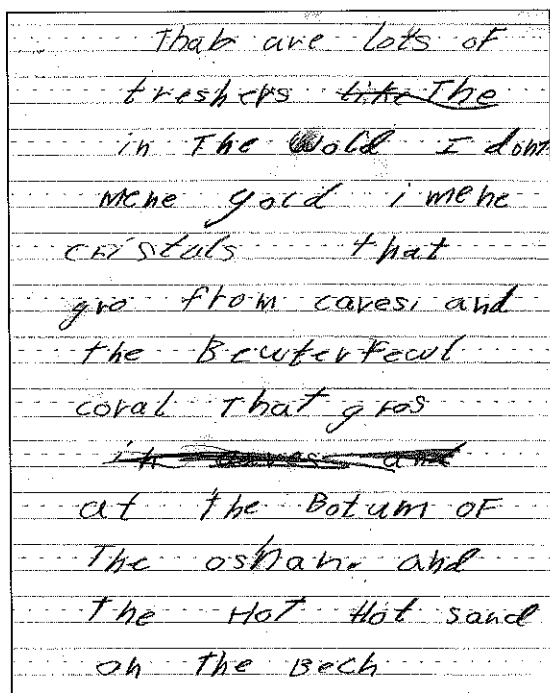
Finally, providing different types of paper allows us to meet the different developmental needs of our students. Though most of the children in a first-grade class are chronologically six years old (at least at the beginning of the year), you will likely see this developmental range:

Figure 2.2
Five- to five-and-a-half-year-olds prefer blank paper.



Developmentally five or five and a half: Students write with large letters, mostly caps. Rather than text moving left to right, it "wraps around" the page in no particular direction. Blank paper works best for children at this stage. (See Figure 2.2.)

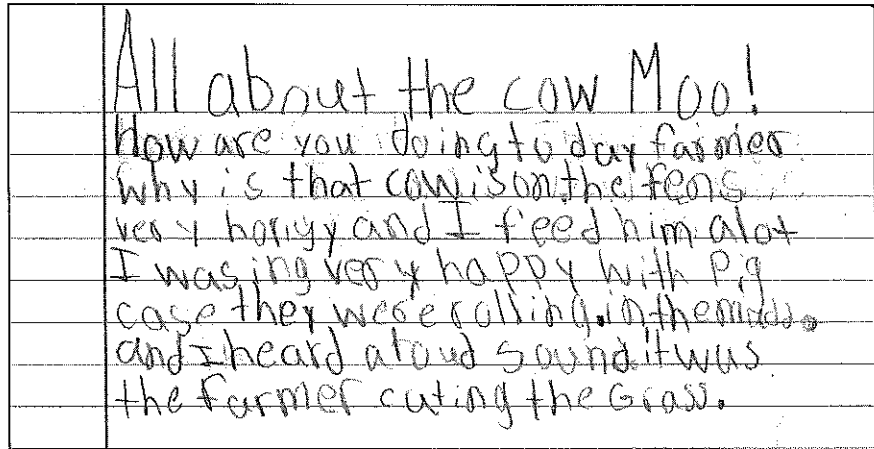
Developmentally six or six and a half: Students are "slapdash," recording letters that are often sprawling and messy. The six-year-old appreciates story paper—paper that provides both solid and dotted lines to help keep letters to form. (See Figure 2.3.)



Developmentally seven: Students no longer want to write on large-lined paper, but beg to use the white paper with the narrower blue lines. Seven-year-olds are becoming increasingly focused, their letters grow smaller and more controlled, and they covet the paper that allows them to write more naturally. If you give a child who's developmentally seven blank paper, he or she will begin by drawing his or her own lines. (See Figure 2.4.)

Figure 2.3
Six-year-olds are happy with story paper.

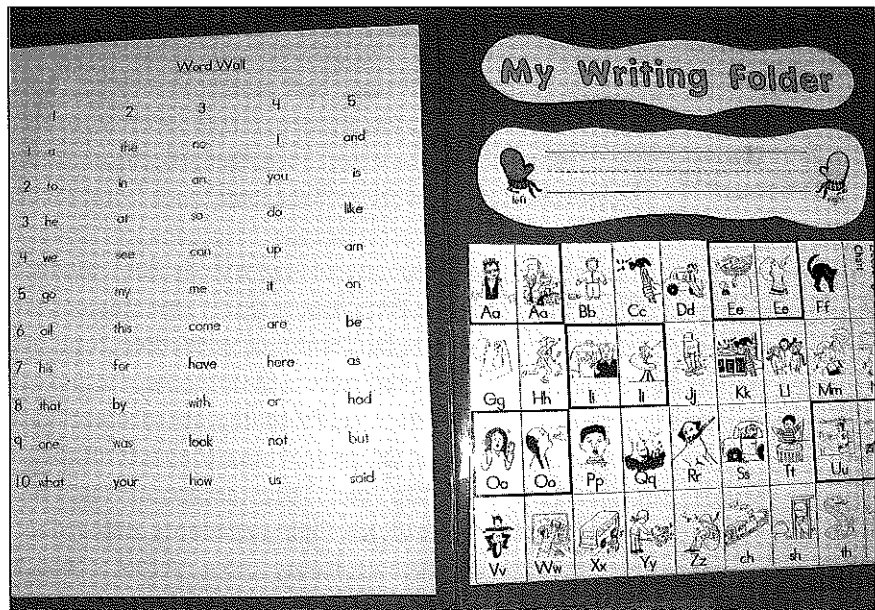
Figure 2.4
Seven-year-olds
want smaller
spaces between
lines.



For writing folders, I use pocket-folders containing resources such as an alphabet chart and frequently used words laminated on the outside (Figure 2.5).

“But I provide alphabet cards on the wall,” you might say. And true, someone—a very long time ago—decided that every primary classroom should have a trail of letters floating near the ceiling. There is something that feels so right about this long-held tradition, and yet for young students who work hard to recall the shape of letters and their corresponding sounds, this is not an optimum placement. In fact, it’s a terrible placement.

Figure 2.5
Writing Folder



Think of the kindergartener who wishes to write the word *wagon*. First he stretches the word out: *www-aaa-gon*. He identifies the *w* sound, but does not remember the letter that represents the sound. So he looks up at the wall for help. Unfortunately, his ability to scan—to find the correct letter, memorize its shape, and then reproduce it on the page—is still fairly undeveloped. Often you will see young children try to “hold” the letter in their mind’s eye, fail, and then have to relocate the letter on the wall all over again. In the meantime, two children who are preparing to leave the room for special assistance do catch his eye. He watches as they gather their things and wonders if he will ever be invited to participate in activities outside the classroom. They leave. He looks down. *What was he doing?*

One of the goals in the primary classroom is keeping our kids heads down! It is far easier to have the alphabet on the desk (either adhered or on a portable chart that can be picked up from the writing center) or laminated on the outside of the journal or writing folder. The more familiar your students are with the particular grid and symbols illustrated, the more they will use it as a resource.

In addition to laminating resources on the outside of the folder, I suggest students keep additional resources in the interior left-hand pockets. These might be lists of things they wish to write about, an editor’s checklist, a completed story map.

Date Stamp and Ink Pad

The use of a date stamp does so much more than remind students to date their work. It provides me a way to monitor daily, individual writing progress, and it encourages students to move away from the idea that each new piece of writing begins and ends with one day’s writing period.

“Date Stamp” is one of the weekly jobs in my writer’s workshop. The student whose turn it is to carry out this responsibility goes to the writing center at the beginning of workshop time and changes the date stamp to match the calendar. Then he or she moves around the classroom asking, “Where would you like me to stamp your work?” Students point to the place on the page where they left off the day before. (Or they indicate the top of the page if they are beginning a new piece.)

This practice quickly helps students recognize that a single topic may be developed over many days. After a week or so of writer’s workshop, a student will inevitably notice (and bring to everyone’s

attention) that the student sharing her work from the author's chair has "three date stamps!" Ah, this is admirable! Before long, many students move from writing brief, spontaneous snapshots to longer, richer pieces.

Date stamps also offer a concrete, visible form of accountability. I will question a student who has seemingly underproduced on any given day. Often a student will have a valid reason, such as, "I was publishing my snake story with Mrs. Olson," at which point I will say, "Of course! How could I have forgotten!" But in other instances I detect a pattern of avoidance and can focus my attention on the particular needs of that student.

Pencils and/or Pens

Most of us learned long ago that individual ownership of pencils does not work in the primary classroom. Therefore, desks or tables often contain a pencil cup or caddy. If this is your system, it is a fine one, though it is amazing how often students can still get in a tussle over who has the "best" pencil from the cup. You might try putting all of the pencils in the writing center, which gives students a larger pool to draw from and decreases their ability to determine which pencil has the most desirable qualities.

In addition to regular pencils, provide blue or green editing pencils—professional editors never use red, knowing that those little red marks wound the writer. Editing pencils help students focus on correcting conventions and encourage them to mark their paper as opposed to erasing (marks on a page demonstrate a writer's understanding and growth). But most of all, using an editing pencil simply feels quite grown up.

"But how can I stop my students from erasing in all stages of the writing process?" I am frequently asked by second-grade teachers. Although "the need to erase" can be a problem for some students at any grade level, it is a particular curse for second graders. Seven-year-olds are perfectionists; they want their writing to look *exactly right*. So they write, erase, write, erase. Much of the writing period can be taken up in this way. So what are we to do?

Remove the erasers from the pencils. That's right, snap them off.

Are you resisting this suggestion? Good! I want you to notice your resistance. You are probably thinking, "Well, there are some times when I do want my students to erase to produce a clean product."

Teachers are not responsible for creating this need to be perfect in second-graders—this is a mark of their development—but we do have to be careful that we don't give contradictory messages. In other words, we can't tell them that we don't want them to erase and then praise them for neat and tidy papers. The very best way to help a second grader release himself or herself from the tyranny of erasing is to praise the student for taking a different route: crossing off, adding a page of additions, drawing an arrow. These are the marks that make for a "perfect paper."

Another option would be to provide pens rather than pencils. Students love writing with the more grown-up ink, their work is easier to photocopy for a multitude of uses, and it eliminates the erasing problem altogether.

Scissors and Tape

"Spider legs" (page 46) and "surgery" (page 48) are two highly successful revision techniques readily employed by primary students, and both require access to scissors and tape.

I know that it's hard to imagine giving your young students free access to something as expensive as transparent tape. And yes, I also know that particularly in the kindergarten classroom, students will initially spend much of their workshop time cutting and taping and creating masterpieces that look nothing like any "book" you or I have ever seen. In fact, at this point in my explanation of what goes into the writing center, you may be convinced that I teach on another planet—or at least in school districts that are very different from yours. So let me address the issue of hoarding.

It is true that when students are first given access to the equivalent of a candy store for writing, they will often take more than their share. They will grab handfuls of paper, they will insist on trying every marker (especially if you, like me, adore the scented markers), they will break the tips of the editing pencils, and they will pull arm-lengths of tape off the roll. So why would you even think of making these supplies available?

Because after the first few days this behavior will stop. I promise.

Why does it stop? Because in addition to conducting a mini-lesson on the proper use and care of materials, you are beginning to focus not on the negative hoarding but on the amazing things some of the kids have begun to do with the materials. You will have Eli read from the

wonderful book he created; you will have Nadine demonstrate the use of spider legs (which you taught her during a conference).

But mostly it stops because the novelty wears off.

And how do you prevent your entire (and perhaps very limited) budget of school supplies from being consumed in the first week? You offer your least expensive, almost-used-up supplies first. Instead of throwing out the broken crayons; the faded, tattered paper; and the nearly dry markers at the end of the year, use them to “open” your writing center. Think of it as recycling.

Graphic Organizers and Editor's Checklists

Graphic organizers are most successful when modeled for students first. Mini-lessons often include the completion of webs, story maps, or nonfiction planning sheets. When I'm sure students are familiar with a particular graphic organizer, I place copies in the writing center for individual use in prewriting and assessment.

Often the use of graphic organizers is optional; however, all students are required to store an editor's checklist (Figure 2.6) in their

folders. After teaching or emphasizing a particular skill during a writing conference, I write it on the student's checklist. The student is then responsible for examining her writing to make sure she's applied her knowledge of that skill before participating in the next conference. Because primary writers are emerging writers, I keep their editor's checklists short. Often if a list has three items, and the student has begun to apply the skills regularly, I will suggest she replace her checklist with a clean copy from the writing center so we can start anew.

Scrap Paper and Supply Request Forms

Inevitably materials run out in the writing center and students feel the need to tell me *immediately*. While I'm conferencing, I

Figure 2.6
Editor's Checklist
from *The Big Book*
of *Reproducible*
Graphic Organizers
(Scholastic, 1999)

[illegible]

Figure 2.7
Supply
Requisition Form

Date: _____
Dear Supply Manager,
The _____ needs to be restocked in
the Writing Center.
Signed: _____

have a consistently enforced rule—one that I highly recommend. Students, barring an injury or major catastrophe, may only interrupt me with a note. In kindergarten and first grade, this buys me at least five more minutes of discussion, and the student who wished to interrupt accomplishes more writing. Second graders are quicker note writers, but less inclined to interrupt on the whole.

One of my first graders who *always* noticed when paper had run out but was loathe to take time from his own writing to write a long note designed a fill-in-the-blank supply requisition form! I ran with his idea and began duplicating a form (Figure 2.7) that was, as you can imagine, quite popular.

Optional Materials

The list of optional materials is fairly self-explanatory. The markers, crayons, and colored pencils are for prewriting, webbing, and illustrating. The brad fasteners and hole punch are for student-created books. The sticky notes can be used for sequencing events or information when prewriting, to make additions, to record questions to be addressed during a conference, or to record comments during a peer conference—and probably a myriad of other purposes. Two items that may need explanation are the baby name book and the children's magazines.

Let's begin with the baby name book. If you have ever asked your students to complete a story map before composing, you know that pri-

many students have a tendency to fill in the *character* section with names of their friends. There's usually a lot of hubbub as students show one another what they've recorded. (Think Valentine's Day without the sugar.) This can be particularly disruptive in second grade, where the ups and downs of transitory friendships are often the undercurrent of the day, and feelings are easily hurt. But even if there was not a concern of social issues trumping writing, the main problem from a writing instructor's point of view is that fiction that features one's young friends quickly stalls after the introduction. Once students have listed the primary characters, the plot goes nowhere. Why? Well, for one, it's very hard for any writer to use his or her imagination when the material is real flesh and blood. And perhaps, once the fun of selecting and listing the characters is over, the story itself loses energy.

So I tell students that as an author, I never use names of people I know in my fiction. In fact, I do quite the opposite. I turn to a baby name book to find truly unique names—names that are seldom heard and will come alive on the page. (My first picture book, *A Net of Stars*, features Etta, Harper, and Fiona—names seldom heard where I live in the Northeast.) I place a baby name book in the writing center and suggest they try this technique. It quickly becomes one of my most dog-eared resources. (If you don't want to invest in a baby name book, bring in an outdated phone book, which provides first and last names.)

As for the children's magazines, I want children to become quite familiar with their formats and the various genres included in each issue. In *Ladybug*, for example, students can read stories, labeled pictures, poems, nonfiction entries, songs, rebus stories, and comics. The issues validate techniques young children use (labeling, for example) and model many types of writing to try.

I also refer to children's magazines when I introduce one form of publishing in my classroom: the Big Book. For the Big Book, I purchase a large, three-ring binder and a package of page protectors. Student pieces are often typed and printed on a single page. Writers illustrate their work around the edges—just like a magazine story. Students may read one another's work from the Big Book at any time, and if I have a few extra moments, I will open to where I left off last (a sticky note helps me remember) and read student work with much flair. I have even allowed students to "check out" the book and bring it home to share with their families. Placing a few sheets of notebook paper in the back allows for parents to write relished positive comments.

Management Systems



Directions for Creating the Monthly Best Writing Book

1. Staple six sheets of eighteen-by-twenty-four-inch construction paper together for each student
2. Write "Best Writing Book" on cover
3. Write the days of the month from September to June at the top of each interior page.
4. At the end of each month, use rubber cement to adhere writing—even stapled writing—to construction paper page. (Use rubber cement on the back side of the last page of writing—add a page if student has written on back side.)

In addition to setting up your classroom, you'll want to have a paper management system established.

For maintaining folders, I recommend creating a procedure that inspires you to clean them out once a month. As mentioned, my students store their work in pocket folders. Often they've stapled pages of writing together. At the end of each month, I sit down with individuals and ask, "Which of these is your best piece of writing?" This selection is then placed in the student's "Best Writing Book." (See sidebar for instructions.) I also share my opinion about which is the student's best piece

of writing. When it comes to selecting the best piece of writing, sometimes the student and I disagree. I might choose the piece in which the student has used spaces between the words for the first time. The student might select the piece in which he wrote the word *underwear*, causing his classmates to fall down laughing during author's chair. The fact that we've chosen different pieces is wholly understandable. I am focused on writing development. The budding author is often focused on audience. Both of these areas are important, so both pieces will go into the best writing book.

I love the practice of ending each month with an evaluative conference, but I will warn you, these take time. Whereas I've learned to be quick and effective during my everyday writing conferences, my evaluative conferences stretch out like a humid July day. I always feel behind. So consider training another adult—an ed. tech or a parent volunteer—to help you with the best writing conferences.

What do I do with the remainder of student work? I chose one or two pieces to place in the student's portfolio and send the rest home. It's important that parents know that their students will be doing lots and lots of practice pieces throughout the year, and not every written product will be "corrected" or brought to publishing standards. Because I focus on the six traits of writing when teaching primary students, I will often have students write the trait we are focusing on at the top of the page (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence



There are commercial stamps printed with the six traits. Students can stamp their work and then check the trait(s) they are giving special attention.

fluency, or conventions; these six traits were first established by the Northwest Regional Educational Lab in Oregon). This way, parents (with a little education during open house) can reinforce the effort that's exhibited in the practice pieces. To

learn more about the six traits, see *Creating Young Writers: Using the Six Traits to Enrich Writing Process in Primary Classrooms* by Vicki Spandel (2007) or *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* by Ruth Culham (2005).

Publishing Area

Believe it or not, there was a time when primary schools established central "publishing houses." Students who had done an exceptionally fine job on a piece would be greeted by parent volunteers who typed up the stories and then carefully bound them into books. The books often had sturdy cardboard covers decorated with wallpaper samples, and pages carefully sewn with durable dental floss. The proud students would return to the classroom where they illustrated their books, which were later celebrated. Many books would find their way into the school library for the remainder of the year.

Very few schools still offer this model of publishing. Somewhere along the line, "publishing" came to mean "copying over your work without any mistakes." All students publish at the same time, removing the motivation to publish one's finest writing. Instead, students publish nearly identical teacher-directed products.

Here, I am going to suggest a publishing program that falls somewhere in the middle of these two models. Consider setting up an area in your room where you (or better yet, a parent or high school volunteer) can work with individual students. The volunteer sits at the computer, and the child sits next to the volunteer and reads his or her work. Volunteers (who you have trained) type the work using all of the proper conventions: punctuation, spelling, capitalization, proper grammar—keeping the child's original language whenever possible. If while reading, the student says, "Oh, I should have said . . ." The volunteer types what the child wished he or she had written, thus reinforcing revision right up to the end.

What do you do with the typed work? Here is a list of ideas:

1. Place in a class anthology (The "Big Book"; see page 23)
2. Mount on a bulletin board
3. Read over the intercom
4. Include in school or class newsletters
5. Post on a Web site
6. Have child read in a podcast
7. Record (audio or video) a class radio show
8. Perform as a skit
9. Read at an authors' tea
10. Compile a class book around a single theme (poems, funny stories, holiday stories, etc.)
11. Include in a class yearbook
12. Include in the school literary magazine
13. Submit to a student market or contest
14. Give as a gift

I do not recommend that primary students copy over their work. If we regularly ask student to rewrite, we are teaching them two things: write short and don't take risks. We also take away one of our best motivating tools. Being able to say something reinforcing such as, "Kara! You added so many quality details to this writing. Would you like to publish it?" goes a long way in motivating our students to be thoughtful, independent writers.

Chapter 2: Spaces That Support Independence

Discussion Questions

- Which concepts, ideas, or methods in this chapter did you find most interesting or informative? Why?
- Which concepts challenged your thinking?
- When discussing students’ desire to erase (pages 19–20), Jennifer challenges us to pay close attention to those ideas we resist, and points out that we often give students conflicting information. Can you identify times during your writing period when you encourage students to do one thing but praise them for the opposite?
- Did you read about ideas you wish to try? If so, what do you require to put new ideas into practice? Do you need additional support? From whom?

Group Activity

As Jennifer mentions, publishing student work does not mean asking them to copy it over. Discuss students’ need for audience, and then consider the ways in which your students might publish authentically. Examine the list on page 26. Which of these ideas would work for your class? Together, brainstorm additional ways that students could publish within your community.

Before the Next Meeting

- Make one change to your classroom layout or writing management system. Share the effect of the change with your group.
- In Chapter 3, Jennifer suggests we read aloud books that capture students’ everyday experiences, since these models often help students to recognize writing subjects in their own lives. Choose a favorite picture book that captures the simple pleasures or concerns in a child’s life, and prepare to share the book at the next meeting.